Soap Opera Effect on Product Preferences in Terms of Country Image: A Case of Turkish TV Serials in Albanian Market

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Abstract: TV serials can be leveraged as an effective mass communication means that is capable of sneaking into people’s lives, and altering their perceptions, habits and preferences. Today globalization has come to facilitate the way in which consumers are exposed to a myriad of foreign products, and country of origin and image emerge as major hints in assessing these products. Foreign TV programs that become popular in a country are known to contribute to the country of origin image of products involved. This study aims to study the way TV viewers in Albania, where Turkish soap operas are popular, perceive products of Turkish origin and whether Turkish TV programs have any effect on the purchasing decisions of Albanians. To this end, the data set of the study was compiled through one-to-one interviews with 413 participants in three Albanian cities (Tirana, Durrës and Kukës). Quantitative data were analyzed using factor analysis and structural equation modeling (SEM) methods while qualitative data were obtained using the in-depth interviews with the people from the field who hold opinions about the matter at hand. The study produced positive findings that imply that TV serials influence product preferences of consumers.

Keywords: Opera, Country Image, Product Preference, Turkish TV Serials.

JEL Classification: M31

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Introduction

Films, TV serials and shows have the potential to influence the audience views and make them adopt certain attitudes in specific issues (Pervan & Martin, 2002; O’Connor et al., 2008; Busby & Klug, 2001; Desai & Basuroy, 2005; Cho, 2007; Hudson & Ritchie, 2006; Kim et al., 2007; Riley et al., 1998). The characters in TV serials may emerge as real life role models for viewers and the places where these serials were shot may turn into popular tourism destinations (Balli et al. 2013, Kim & Long 2012, Busby & Klug, 2001).

Soap operas are seen as one of the successful advertising venues (Pervan & Martin, 2002). They have a significant role in influencing lifestyles, purchasing habits and brand preferences of viewers as well as in boosting the image of the country of origin (Cho, 2007; O’Connor et al., 2008). They are at least capable of increasing the level of awareness of their country of origin (Kim et al., 2007).

The image effect created by films and soap operas do not tend to be short-lived in general. This applies to both positive and negative images. Advantages of the positive country of origin image created by films and soap operas or disadvantages of the negative image so created may last for years (Hudson & Ritchie, 2006). The soap operas that portray a positive country image can boost the country of origin as a popular brand, thereby giving a competitive edge to the products of that country in the international markets and influencing the purchasing preferences of consumers.

Turkey started to sell soap operas to foreign countries in 2001. Its exports have increased in recent years and Turkish soap operas have come to enjoy a sizable audience in the Middle East and Balkans. As these shows that secured international followers made positive contributions to the country of origin image (Brıljavac, 2011; Türbedar, 2012; Radic, 2011), this also changed the perspective on Turkey (Öktem, 2010).

The first Turkish soap opera was aired in 2011 in Albania, a country located in the Balkans, but it was in 1980 when Albanians first got in touch with Turkish films. “Al Yazmalm” (The Girl with the Red Scarf) is the first Turkish film aired in Albania (Telegraf, 2012). After several films that were aired in those years, Turkish soap operas invaded Albanian TV stations and they quickly became very popular (Agolli, 2012). Despite the fact that both countries enjoyed a common past, little was known about Turkey in Albania, and this has changed thanks to Turkish soap operas (Dumani, 2012). Common past and culture and similarities in family life between Albania and Turkey were cited as the reason why Turkish soap operas became popular by dethroning their previously popular Latin American counterparts (Tirana Times, 2012). Whether there has been a change in how products of Turkish origin are perceived in Albania in parallel to the image change attributable to the impact of Turkish soap operation was an object of curiosity, and this study aimed to measure the effect of Turkish soap operas on product preferences of Albanian consumers.

Country-of-origin image
The country of origin image (COI) consists of views and beliefs a person may hold about a specific country. Beliefs s/he may hold in his/her mind about that country may have been acquired from different sources and at different times. These beliefs may be real or unreal, but they still can affect that person’s attitudes and perceptions concerning the images of the products from that country. Before making a purchasing decision and during the phase of assessing the products, consumers tend to pay attention not only to their internal characteristics such as taste, design, performance and capacity to serve the purpose as well as to their external features such as price, packaging, brand and warranty (Bilkey & Nes, 1982; Zain & Yasin, 1997; Agrawal & Kamakura, 1999). While characteristics such as price and brand signify the quality of a product (Rezvanil et al.), the country where that product is produced or the country which is represented by that product, i.e., the perceptions created in the minds of consumers by the country of origin image, may emerge as major hints and criteria for evaluating the products involved (Bilkey & Nes, 1982; Roth & Romeo, 1992; Ayyildiz & Cengiz, 2007; Zamantili & Durmusoglu, 2008; Roth & Diamantopoulos, 2009; Lampert & Jaffe, 1998). This implies that the success of products in the international markets is determined not only by objective factors such as price and quality, but also subjective factors.

It was Schooler (1965) who first used the term “country of origin” in the marketing literature (Pereira et al., 2005). Since then, a number of studies have been conducted on this topic (Lopez et al., 2011) and this concept has even become one of the most studied themes in the marketing literature (Agrawal & Kamakura 1999; Bloemer et al, 2009). Some literature studies (Al-Sulaiti & Baker, 1998) argued that the term country of origin should enter the literature as the fifth element of the marketing mix in addition to the product itself, its price, promotional activities and distribution channels (Dosen et al., 2007). In time, the term country of origin has come to be perceived as the country of origin image (Pereira et al, 2005). It was Nagashima (1970) who was first to make a widely accepted definition of the country of origin image. Nagashima (1970) defined the country of origin image as “the picture, the reputation, the stereotype that businessmen and consumers attach to products of a specific country.” For Nagashima (1970), this image is created by such variables as representative products, national characteristics, economic and political background, history and traditions (Nagashima 1970; Pereira et al, 2005; Rezvanil et al, 2012; Lin & Chen, 2006).

Means of mass communication enjoy a guiding effect in the shaping of the image in the minds of consumers, but personal experiences of consumers and opinion leaders in the society, too, play a role in this process. Given all these aspects, the country of origin image may guide consumers emotionally and behaviorally in the purchase decision process. A number of studies suggest that the country of origin image can make a significant impact on the consumer preferences (Bilkey & Nes, 1982; Agrawal & Sikri, 1996; Kaynak & Kara, 2002; Ozretic Dosen et al., 2007) and the relation between the country of origin image and the purchasing behavior becomes more important in the ongoing global marketing conception.
Given the fact that developed countries enjoy a more positive image compared to the developing countries, we see that products and brands of developed countries tend to be perceived as having higher quality and more reliable (Abedniya & Zaeim, 2011). Numerous studies confirmed such consumer tendencies (Zain & Yasin, 1997). Some studies found that the products whose country of origin is not specified tend to be perceived as more reliable than the products of underdeveloped countries (Acharya & Elliott, 2001; Kaynak et al., 2000).

Although the past studies found that consumers tended to perceive domestic products more positively compared to foreign products (Watson & Wright, 1999), the tendency to prefer domestic products over imported products is higher in developed countries (Chryssochoidis et al., 2007). Moreover, some studies suggested that when a choice is to be made between two countries with and without cultural similarity with the own country, consumers tend to prefer the products of the country with the cultural similarity (Crawford & Lamb, 1981; Wang & Lamb, 1983; Watson & Wright, 1999).

Likewise, TV serials tend to bring about cultural and social convergence among different societies (Castello, 2010). This lends credence to the argument that increased popularity of Turkish TV serials in Albania will boost Turkey’s country image and foster Albanians’ preferences for Turkish products, given the sheer amount of cultural values historically shared between two countries. In support of this argument, it was observed that the increased popularity of Turkish TV serials in the Middle East and Balkans led to an increase in Turkey’s trade and tourism revenues from the countries located in these regions that imported TV serials from Turkey (Balli et al., 2013). It is widely acknowledged that TV serials tend to increase overall consumption and are an effective advertisement tool (Pervan & Martin, 2001; Miller, 1995). The conceptual model and hypotheses developed in this framework can be listed as follows:

Figure 1: Conceptual Model
Soap Opera Effect on Product Preferences in Terms of Country Image: A Case of Turkish TV Serials in Albanian Market

H1a: There is a positive correlation between watching TV serials of a specific country and the image of that country.
H1b: There is a positive correlation between watching TV serials of a specific country and noticing the country of origin of products.
H1c: There is a positive correlation between watching TV serials of a specific country and preferring products of that country.
H2: There is a positive correlation between having a good country image and preferring products of that country.
H3: There is a positive correlation between noticing the country of origin of products and preferring specific products.

Research methodology

Quantitative method was employed in this study. The data were obtained from three Albanian cities, namely Tirana (the capital), Durrës (a tourism city) and Kukës. Face-to-face interviewing was adopted as the method of collecting quantitative data. In designing the questionnaire, three local linguists were consulted about the comprehensibility of the questions. A sample run was made with 20 questionnaires to revise certain questions and make additions to and omissions from the final questionnaire. 74 people from Kukës, 112 people from Durrës and 227 people from Tirana participated in the study. The face-to-face interviewing of the participants produced no invalid questionnaire. The questions which were asked to participants during the interview and which sought to measure their attitudes and approaches to identify the impact of Turkish TV serials on consumers in the Albanian markets are given in Table 3 with mean values, standard deviation and factor values. The conceptual model and questions were designed by the researcher in the light of literature (Castello, 2010, Chryssochoidis et. al, 2007, Kaynak et.al, 2000, Kim & Long, 2012) data as the literature review produced no study that measured the direct effect of TV serials on product preferences. 14 variables in the conceptual model were measured using the 5-level Likert item (ranging between “I strongly disagree” and “I strongly agree”). Exploratory factor analysis (EFA) and structural equation modeling (SEM) were used to test the conceptual models and obtain scientific findings.

Analysis and Results

The demographic information relating to participants, including gender, age, marital status, education, occupation and income is given in Table 1.

Table 1: Sample Characteristics
15.7% (65 people) of the participants said they do not watch Turkish TV serials regularly. The number and percentages of TV serials regularly watched by participants before and during the studied period are given as follows:

Table 2: Numbers of Watching Turkish TV Serials

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Number of TV Serials</th>
<th>Percent (%)</th>
<th>Number of People</th>
<th>Number of TV Serials</th>
<th>Percent</th>
<th>Number of People</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>26.2</td>
<td>108</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>9.4</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>22.5</td>
<td>93</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1.7</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>23.7</td>
<td>98</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>0.7</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Participants were asked whether they prefer Turkish products while shopping, and 69 % (285) gave affirmative answers. 50.8 % (210 people) of the participants noted that Turkish TV serials make a positive effect on their preferences for Turkish products. To better understand the role of TV serials in driving product preferences, the relation between the “number of Turkish TV serials regularly watched” and the “preference for Turkish products” was tested using the chi-square method and a significant relation was found (p>0.000). Thus, while the rate of those who never watch Turkish TV serials regularly was 43.1%, this rate was 68.5% for those who regularly watch at least one TV serial, 78.6% for those who regularly watch three TV serials and 85.7% for those who regularly watch five TV serials and 100% for those who regularly watch six serials.

The exploratory factor analysis (EFA) and structural equation modeling (SEM) were measured using four factors and 19 variables.
Cronbach’s alpha was measured as 0.848. This rate is considered as sufficient and appropriate for the reliability of findings obtained (Kalaycı, 2010). Also the KMO measure of sampling adequacy has been measured as 0.875 and Approx. Chi-Square; 3907.102, df; 171, Sig; 0.000. Variables and mean values and factor loads are given in Table 3.

Table 3: Factor Loads

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No</th>
<th>Factors and Sub- Items</th>
<th>Mean Values</th>
<th>Factors Loads</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Soap Opera</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>S1</td>
<td>I often follow the Turkish serials</td>
<td>3.47</td>
<td>.880</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>S2</td>
<td>I like watching Turkish serials</td>
<td>3.63</td>
<td>.871</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>S3</td>
<td>I intend to follow also other Turkish serials in the future</td>
<td>3.41</td>
<td>.857</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>S4</td>
<td>Turkish TV serials are among the most favorite programs</td>
<td>3.27</td>
<td>.815</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>S5</td>
<td>I like all Turkish serials</td>
<td>3.17</td>
<td>.781</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>S6</td>
<td>When Turkish serials are broadcasted I don't have any plan to do</td>
<td>2.79</td>
<td>.761</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Considering Country Origin of Product</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>O1</td>
<td>I do not prefer products the countries I do not like</td>
<td>2.96</td>
<td>.797</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>O2</td>
<td>The products of some countries not prefer consciously</td>
<td>3.13</td>
<td>.775</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>O3</td>
<td>I prefer products according to the origin of the country</td>
<td>3.41</td>
<td>.517</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>O4</td>
<td>Country of origin gives me ideas about products</td>
<td>3.73</td>
<td>.500</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Country Image</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I1</td>
<td>I believe that the products of developed countries are more quality</td>
<td>3.87</td>
<td>.804</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I2</td>
<td>I always prefer products of developed countries</td>
<td>3.47</td>
<td>.712</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I3</td>
<td>I mostly prefer products of economically developed countries</td>
<td>3.66</td>
<td>.702</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I4</td>
<td>I prefer products according to price and quality not to origin of the country</td>
<td>3.97</td>
<td>.507</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I5</td>
<td>Country of origin of the product should be respected</td>
<td>3.55</td>
<td>.454</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Product Preference</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P1</td>
<td>After I followed the Turkish serials my ideas have changed positively for Turkish products</td>
<td>2.91</td>
<td>.774</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The total variance of 62.87%, obtained via the exploratory factor analysis (EFA), is regarded as a significant rate in terms of representativeness of the general opinions and this rate should be at least 50% for acceptability of the analysis (Meyers et al., 2006).

The relationship between factors and variables was analyzed using the structural equation modeling (SEM). Initially, we couldn’t reach to the model reference values of Goodness of Fit with these EFA variables. So the model was refined by eliminating three items (S5, I1 and I3) that have largest error variances. After removing three items, the test of final measurement model showed a good fit as shown Figure 1.

The findings that were obtained in the SEM analysis and that indicated the Goodness of Fit results of the analysis are given in Table 4 while the findings showing the hypothesis results were given in Table 5.

Table 4: Goodness of Fit
The findings obtained via the structural equation modeling indicate that people who watch TV serials of a specific country tend to prefer the products of that country. The most strongly supported hypotheses are the power of TV serials to influence product preferences of consumers and the effect of the country image in product preferences. Also, the hypothesis that TV serials tend to boost the image of the country where they are produced was found acceptable with a 5-percent margin of error. In this context, the increase in Turkey's exports to the countries where Turkish TV serials are followed (Balli et al., 2013) signifies a positive indication of this hypothesis in practice. Likewise, the hypothesis that the country of origin is respected in product preferences was another approach which was found acceptable with a 10-percent margin of error. No correlation was found between watching the TV serials of a specific country and the
checking the country of origin of products in shopping, and the hypothesis was rejected.

**Discussion and conclusions**

The basic purpose of this study is to examine whether there is correlation between watching TV serials of a specific country and preferring to buy products of that country and find out the potential of TV serials for influencing consumer preferences. The findings of the study indicate that many Albanian consumers have developed positive attitudes toward Turkish products after watching Turkish TV serials. Even 50.8% of the participants said Turkish TV serials are the main factor influencing their decision to buy Turkish products.

In addition to other benefits, TV serials have created a new marketing sphere called destination marketing with which the places where TV serials take place are promoted as touristic locations or holiday resorts to be visited by the audience (Balli et al., 2013; Kim & Long 2012; Busby & Klug 2001; O’Connor et al., 2010). The findings obtained using the exploratory factor analysis and structural equation modeling as well as the hypotheses results indicate that TV serials play a major role in shaping consumer preferences directly or indirectly. The hypothesis that sports a direct correlation between watching TV serials of a specific country and preferring products of that country (H1c) was accepted most strongly (Table 5, p<0.01). The hypothesis that was accepted with the second highest values is H2 that shows the effect of the country image on the product preferences (p<0.01). The finding that TV serials affect product preferences also indirectly is found at the hypothesis H1a, which is accepted in the light of the findings (p<0.05). This is because the regularly watched TV serials of a country tend to have a positive effect on that country’s image and they enhance the country image (Cho et al., 2007). Given the fact that H2, which indicates the role of the country image in the product preferences, is also supported, it is clear that TV serials have a direct or indirect effect on consumers’ preferring the products of the country where those serials are produced.

The hypothesis, H3, which signifies the impact of the image of the country of origin in product preferences, and which was extensively studied previously (Bilkey and Nes, 1982; Roth and Romeo, 1992; Lampert and Jaffe, 1998; Roth & Diamantopoulos, 2009) was verified in this study as well (p<0.10). However, as no correlation was found between watching the TV serials of a specific country and the checking the country of origin of the products preferred and the hypothesis H1b was rejected.

To sum it up in the light of the foregoing discussion, the rate with which the TV serials of a specific country are watched is effective in directly or indirectly driving the popularity of the products of that country. Of course, other marketing components, too, should be effectively employed in order to increase the popularity of products of a country. But it is clear that when other marketing components are well-designed, popular TV serials play a critical role in boosting the popularity of the products of the
country where those serials are produced as well as enhancing the image of that country.

Implications for managers

That TV serials can play a strong role in facilitating the market penetration of the products of the countries where they are produced has important implications for firms and managers. Given the fact that the places featured in TV serials emerge as potential tourism destinations (Kim & Long, 2012), the products used or consumed in these serials are also advertised. Product placement has today become a widely used advertisement tool (Pervan & Martin, 2002). Thus, product placements in the serials and sponsor advertisements run before and after the serials are recognized as very effective way for ensuring product penetration in the countries to which these serials are exported. Brand managers may choose to focus more on the markets in the countries where the TV serials which feature advertisements and placements of their products are broadcast, and by doing so, they can increase their market share and launch branding efforts in those markets. Likewise, it is generally accepted that women are more resolved and eager to regularly watch TV serials (Stern et al., 2005; Thompson et al., 2000). Thus, the brand managers who sell products specifically geared for women may select TV serials as the media where their products are advertised.

Limitations and future research

This study focused on a topic which has not been intensively studied, but was restricted to a sample group of 413 people due to constraints imposed by lack of resources and time. Still the study’s sample size is above 384 people, which is defined as the number for 5-percent margin of error (Balcı, 2010) and its sample size is regarded as ‘good’ in terms of having 300 subjects and over for factor analysis (Meyers et al., 2006). That the study was conducted solely with Albanians due to lack of resources and costs can be considered as another restriction for the study.

This study focused on the role of TV serials in product preferences, but future studies may choose to examine the product placement approaches by the firms which operate, or plan to operate, in international markets or their tendencies for sponsoring TV serials which have the potential for being exported, with a view to finding out the place and role of TV serials in marketing. Moreover, the potential for becoming successful in foreign markets and the role and effects of cultural proximity between different societies in international marketing are other potential areas for study.

References


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